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WOMEN AND WORK

The Present Situation

Paid employment is a key issue for women in developing countries. Women's social and political status is closely linked to their economic status. Half of the global population is female. Women perform two-thirds of all work in the world economy, yet they receive only 10 per cent of the world's income, and they control at the most 1 per cent of the amount they earn (1). Most of women's daily work is carried out in the informal sector, whether in food production or in marketing enterprises, family maintenance or agricultural labour. This type of work is usually performed without remuneration; therefore, it is perceived as having little economic value and remains unrecorded in official statistics. Yet, women's work is a vital contribution to national economic development.

Development patterns are sometimes increasing the work burden of women. The policy and investment focus in developing and developed countries on crops for export has made more demands on women's contribution to agricultural tasks in the field. An 18-hour working day is not uncommon for rural women. The outmigration of men from rural areas to urban centres and to other countries in search of cash has burdened women with the double tasks of being income earning-heads of households and nurturing their families. Conditions such as unemployment and increases in basic food prices, stemming in part from the terms required by the IMF, have increased women's workload dramatically.

At the same time, productivity-enhancing machinery for agriculture and training in modern farm production techniques have been directed primarily at men. Mass production and capital-intensive technology in urban areas and mechanization in rural areas have squeezed women out of traditional spheres of employment. To maintain some income, rural women may have no choice but turn to marginal, seasonal or part-time jobs on farms and plantations; urban women turn to low-status, irregular and poorly-remunerated work in industry. Migrant women are particularly vulnerable. As a result, the female participation rate in the modern industrial sector is low relative to the male participation rate.

Even if women succeed in finding employment in the modern sector, they are often paid lower wages than men. The ILO reports that women earn only 75 per cent of male wages in manufacturing jobs in developed countries. Economic development does not, of itself, close the wage gap. And the renowned saying 'last hired, first fired' unfortunately is true for women, even if they surpass men in educational levels (2).

The impact of trade and investment development patterns and the protectionist barriers against labour-intensive imports in the West have often perpetuated this situation. The fact that women in the Third World usually have to work so hard for so little has harmful effects on society as a whole. Women's health suffers significantly, and their inability to find time and money to upgrade their education and

knowledge of sanitation and nutrition affects the well-being of the entire family. It reinforces the circle of poverty.

Past Achievements

The issue of employment for women is receiving increasing attention by governments and private development agencies. It is now widely accepted that the 'trickle down' concept of development did not work, and especially it did little to improve women's situation. Many more programmes are now specifically designed to meet women's economic needs. Achieving equity gradually is becoming a development goal in itself.

Where in the past development programmes have concentrated primarily on women's reproductive role in society and favoured projects related to sanitation or nutrition, more emphasis is now placed on supporting women in their productive capacity. Women receive more job training and education in updated professional skills. Development agencies are increasingly supporting income generating projects, and assisting women in enterprises which require modern skills and which produce goods of substantial economic value.

For example, CIDA and Christian Action for Development in the Caribbean have helped finance a project in Jamaica to produce furniture and equipment for day-care centres, requiring carpentry and welding as the major skills. A CUSO grant helped women in rural Tanzania to set up a soap-making cooperative, and a UNICEF project worked with women in Bangladesh on maintenance and repair of village hand pumps (3).

Third World industrialization and growth strategies, Northern trade policies and investment by transnational corporations have had a major impact on women employed in the modern sector. In newly-industrialized and industrializing countries, women represent a significant component of the manufacturing labour force. They even predominate in certain export-oriented industries, such as electronics, textiles and clothing.

Statistics indicate that in a number of Third World countries the proportion of gainfully employed women has been increasing (4). These increases generally have occurred in the industrial and service sectors, primarily areas requiring lower level skills and offering low pay and minimum job security. Even though more women have joined the paid labour force, questions remain about wages, labour conditions, the stability of work and the extent to which these job opportunities enhance the skills, status and future earning prospects for women.

In many societies, women and men still perform different kinds of work. Although definitions of gender specific work vary greatly across cultures, work is frequently strictly segregated along gender lines. Labour market segregation and inequality reflect patterns and stereotypes that are not easily changed. Even on farms, where the entire family works cooperatively, women and girls often perform different tasks than boys. This labour market segregation often presents a barrier for women who want to perform better remunerated work, and makes it difficult for women to be hired or promoted into executive positions.

The feminization of poverty, whereby the percentage of women among the poor is steadily increasing, is a fact for both developing and developed countries. In the Third World, women perform many tasks that in Western society are considered non-traditional, such as construction, road building, and heavy agricultural labour. However, international development agencies sometimes design programmes that transmit traditional Western concepts of the sexual division of labour. Research has shown that the majority of development programmes in the past have tended to concentrate women in a narrow range of jobs which usually are not very well paid, such as nursing, teaching, social work, home economics, food services, cleaning, secretarial and clerical tasks. Relatively few women have ever been trained for supervisory or management positions.

Future Action

- * Solutions to the problem of labour market segregation can begin with legislation against job discrimination and the provision of social measures, such as the provision of child care facilities. However, experience has shown that laws are not enough. Policy changes, and in some cases, affirmative action programmes in the educational system and the workplace, need to be undertaken.
- * Women's contribution to the economy of their countries needs to be recognized and recorded. The activities in the formal and modern sector would not be possible without the supportive role women play in the subsistence sector.
- * Women need more access to training, credit and technology. Training programmes have to address the needs of the informal sector. In Latin America, for example, women make up about 46 - 70 per cent of the informal sector (5). Women also need on-the-job-training in transferrable skills that could be useful for local enterprises after periods of seasonal employment.
- * Economic development provides a substantial expansion of opportunities for men and women alike. Particularly relevant for women's employment are strategies that couple measures designed to promote the expansion of large-scale industry in the formal sector with complementary measures to encourage small-scale production in the informal sector.

Footnotes

1. United Nations Statistics, released at the Mid-Decade Conference on Women in Copenhagen, 1980.
2. Women of Asia, The Minority Rights Group, Elizabeth Eviota, "Philippines", London 1984.
3. Carr, Marilyn, Blacksmith, Baker, Roofing-Sheet Maker. Employment for Rural Women in Developing Countries, Intermediate Technology Publications, London 1984.
4. Quoted in United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, "Some Aspects of the Role of Women in Economic Development", ECE/SEM/R.1, 31 August 1984.
5. Peebles, Dana, "Changing the Status of Women in Development", The CUSO Journal, 1984.



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